



EDWIN T. MEREDITH

1876 - 1928

Annals of Iowa

ESTABLISHED 1863

Vol. XXIX, No. 8

Des Moines, April, 1949

Third Series

Eminent Iowan Series



EDWIN T. MEREDITH

By SUCCESSFUL FARMING STAFF

Had the story of the life of Edwin Thomas Meredith been written as an anonymous romance, critics would have called it a thing of inspiration, a story of happiness mixed with bits of disappointment, a story in which the hero moved rapidly to his place at the top, and then they would have summed it all up with the label "highly improbable", or perhaps even "totally impossible."

Had a Highland Park college student suggested to a classmate 35 years ago, that young Ed Meredith, whose tangible assets were non-existent, would in a short quarter of a century rise from the obscurity of a little printing shop to the fame rightfully granted to the leaders of a great nation, that classmate might have been jeered.

It would not have been unreasonable to suggest that this Iowa farm boy might some day become a leader among farmers; it would have been conceivable that he might become an authority on farming and farm problems.

It would not have been unreasonable to suggest that he might renounce his interest in agriculture and win for himself a place in the world of business.

It would not have been difficult to believe that he might, by dint of earnest effort, make of himself an

able politician and by the time he had served his party for forty or fifty years, become a political power and party leader.

But it would have been too much to suppose that a farm boy could, in a period of twenty-five or twenty-six years, climb to a commanding place among the leaders of American agriculture, become an outstanding figure in the field of American business and finance and win, through recognition of sheer ability, a powerful seat in the councils of a great political organization.

Yet Edwin T. Meredith accomplished all of these things.

Because he had mastered all that the little one-room country schools, the rural Iowa schools of the 1880's, had to offer, Ed Meredith, farm-born and reared, came to Des Moines to matriculate in the business school of Highland Park college. He arrived in 1894, suit case in hand and with few dollars in his pocket. He was determined to work his way through Highland Park college and wasted no time in inquiring where the college was and how he could get there. He was informed that if he would go to Sixth avenue and watch for a Highland Park street car, it would take him to his destination.

The first car that came along bore the words then looming largest in his mind, but for some reason or other, it failed to stop on his signal. He took after the car on the double-quick, catching up with it several blocks down the street, and entered it by climbing over the half-gates. Telling of the incident later, someone asked him why he didn't wait for the next car. Young Ed replied without a moment's hesitation, "But that was *the car* I was told to get!"

A trivial incident, perhaps, but typical of this young farm lad who later was to become not only a successful publisher, but a leader in many avenues of worthy endeavor among his fellow men.

ENTERED THE NEWSPAPER PLANT

His grandfather was a Des Moines publisher—a well-to-do retired farmer—whose enthusiasm for the cause of Populism and Greenbackism had led him to found a weekly county farm paper under the name of the *Farmers' Tribune*. But the *Farmers' Tribune* was very much of a struggling paper and always had been. It was kept alive only through Uncle Tommy Meredith's practice of increasing his capital investment. Too, by the time young Ed had reached the age of sixteen and had graduated from the country schools, Uncle Tommy was getting old.

During the first few months at Highland Park college, young Ed had been helping his grandfather on the *Farmers' Tribune*. At first Ed's job was one of general assistant to everybody. As such, he learned the printing business. And before Ed had completed even his first year at Highland Park, Uncle Tommy asked him to spend all of his time helping on the paper. Soon Ed was bookkeeper, then he began to help his grandfather conduct the correspondence, and next he started to sell advertising.

Then Ed at nineteen was married, and Uncle Tommy presented him with the *Farmers' Tribune* as a wedding present. But it was very much of a struggling paper—it wasn't paying its own way—Populism was on the wane. The prospects were not very bright for this nineteen-year-old boy and his wife, with no capital and a dying paper on their hands.

But the young publisher had ideas, tremendous enthusiasm, and an unbelievable supply of energy. He told his mother that the days were gone in which the *Farmers' Tribune* had become a county farm paper, that he was going to send a sample copy of the *Farmers' Tribune* to every farmer in the state of Iowa—and his mother thought her son crazy.

Warming to the work at hand the young man tackled a task that was almost insurmountable. The champion of Greenbackism was turned into a non-partisan farm paper, with a circulation statewide in extent. Tobacco and liquor advertising was refused. The undertaking at last seemed to have some promise. It became, in a small way, a paying proposition. But this young Ed Meredith had visions of a greater farm paper. Even then he was looking beyond Iowa.

A VISION THAT BECAME REALITY

And then it was that Mr. Meredith's genius as a publisher proved itself. He could sense what people wanted in a farm publication—he could surround himself with capable men and inspire in them a tremendous loyalty to the ideals of the organization he was creating.

Mr. Meredith believed that American agriculture was not national in character. He believed that soil and climatic conditions made certain types of agricultural practice more profitable in certain large sections than in other areas. He saw the farmers of the south growing cotton and tobacco—he recognized that on the Pacific coast an orchard type of agriculture was rapidly developing.

Different from both of those agricultures was the large scale cattle ranching of the Rocky mountain territory, and still different, the diversified agriculture of the midwestern plains country. He believed that a farm magazine concentrating on the farm problems of one type of agriculture could best serve those farmers that necessarily followed that particular type of agricultural practice. The diversified agriculture of the Middlewest was recognized by him as being the most profitable of these farming sections.

So, in 1902, the unpartisan, non-political, practical *Successful Farming* was founded. Paid advertising was not accepted until a circulation of 100,000 had been built—a circulation large enough to command an advertising rate of fifty cents the agate line. Someone asked Mere-

dith why he had selected that particular title. "Well," he replied, "when I was searching for a title I tried to think of the thing I wanted most to do, to be. I wanted most of all to be successful, so I took that for the title of the new magazine."

Two years later the *Farmers' Tribune* was sold. Mr. Meredith wished to devote all of his time to this new publication of his—the one he had founded.

It sounds easy now to read the story of those early days, but they were far from that. For eight years after *Successful Farming* was born Meredith was to fight an uphill battle. The issue was in doubt many times and many associates lost faith and left for "greener" pastures. But others had faith and stuck it out—putting their pay back into the till on more than one occasion, so that postage and other expenses might be paid.

The time came when the "Chief" was determined to go through with his dream of a large, well-lighted, well-ventilated building, where he could have his own presses and create a desirable place to work. When the building was completed, Mr. Meredith called in his general manager and indicated that he wanted to borrow additional funds to finance a trainload of eastern advertising men he proposed to bring to Des Moines to see the building and equipment and the great agricultural midwest.

"But," the general manager protested, "we have already extended ourselves to the limit." "Well," replied the "Chief," "tell our creditors that unless we can show these people what we have, we are 'broke', and they are 'broke' with us." This happened at the time World War I had just put a crimp in eastern business. To say that the east was terror-stricken is putting it mildly. Business was shut up tight in the east, but the west was not overly excited—had not become too concerned—because it was far from the theatre of action. Mr. Meredith wanted to show these men of the east that there was "business as usual" in the west. He won his argu-

ment, and the trip was planned. The advertising men of the east came. They saw. And they went after the business the west had to offer. They advertised and Mr. Meredith's vision became a reality!

The real story of the Meredith Publishing company, like many in the publishing business, is one of a humble beginning, heartbreaks, and finally, a richly deserved success. It is what our armed forces have been fighting for on more than a hundred battle fronts all over the world. It is the story of a young man's dreams come true—a story that's now possible only in America.

A GARDEN MAGAZINE PLANNED

It wasn't too long after *Successful Farming* had been recognized as a success that Mr. Meredith began to plan for a garden magazine that would serve the home lovers of town and city in a way similar to that of *Successful Farming* on mid-western farms. A real down-to-earth magazine of that type had been in his mind for many years, long before it became possible to move for its establishment.

Ten years after the founding of *Successful Farming*, and before World War I, there appeared a small advertisement asking for subscriptions to this new publication, that in another twelve years would be *Better Homes and Gardens*. This and that interfered, the subscription money received from the first advertisement was returned, and not until after the war flurry had calmed a bit in 1922, did the "Chief" give the green light to put together the first "dummy" copy of *Fruit, Garden and Home*, changed to *Better Homes and Gardens* two years later. With this "dummy" and an idea, Meredith went back east to knock on advertisers' doors. He sold 10,000 lines of advertising, guaranteed 150,000 circulation, and the presses started to roll. Again Ed Meredith had judged correctly the need and temper of the American people.

Dairying held an important role in tiding agriculture over its post-war depression. Nutrition experts were

emphasizing the value of dairy products in maintaining the national health. Mr. Meredith believed that dairying should be more widely adopted on mid-western and middle-Atlantic farms. He bought *Kimball's Dairy Farmer*—a publication with a circulation less than 50,000—remade it editorially, established new circulation policies, and published the first copy of the *Dairy Farmer* in October, 1922, as a dairy farm publication of truly national scope. As the interest in dairy farming increased among the farmers of the middlewest, *Successful Farming* and the *Dairy Farmer* were merged in 1929.

Mr. Meredith not only had ability for sensing the admitted needs of the public, but also had the genius and vision to perceive the value of innovations that were needed and not generally recognized. There was, for instance, this problem of definitely interesting the ambitious farm boy and girl in farm life. When a boy on his father's farm, young Ed had been given a pig—a pig so sickly and runty that there was no excuse for putting it into the feedlot. He bottle-fed the young porker and cared for it, fattened it, and grudgingly sold it. A small incident, a passing matter to the father, but an incident that later had a great influence on a national movement. For this experience had stuck in Mr. Meredith's mind, and years later became the inspiration that gave impetus to what is now the national boys' and girls' club movement, a movement in which Mr. Meredith showed vital interest, and its success was in a large way due to his efforts.

PIG AND CALF FINANCING

Certain it is that the sickly pig episode was the moving factor in Mr. Meredith's establishment of a \$200,000 loan fund from which the farm boy or girl could borrow the money to buy the pig, calf, the seed, or whatever it was that interested him. The money from the loan fund enabled the farm boy and girl to have property rights, to have something of his very own.

Mr. Meredith asked only that the parents sign the note as evidence of their consent to the venture, that the county agent sign the note as evidence that the boy or girl was identified with the local organization, and that one or two of the local business men sign the note as evidence that the money would be spent for the purpose for which it was intended. It was specifically stated in the note that no financial obligation was incurred by any of the signers except individually by the boy or the girl.

Within three months after the foundation of the loan fund had been announced, more than ten thousand separate negotiations had been started and most of them had been completed. Nor did the influence of the loan fund stop with those who borrowed from it. Hundreds of letters were received in the first three months alone, saying that because the parents, or the local banker, had seen the offer, the boy had been given his animal or had been permitted to borrow the money from the local bank.

To interest the boy or girl in farm life, to increase farm production, to teach the boy or girl primary business principles—these were Meredith's objectives. He was quoted as saying—and it was his strong belief:

"Keep the farm boy or girl on the farm. To do this you must make the farm interesting to them. You must make the attraction as great as that of the city."

"I have known Meredith often to hire a young man who apparently had failed elsewhere," said a close friend of the publisher. "I have heard him say, 'What does it matter if he has failed so far? Think how close I came to failing at times. A small thing—any circumstance might have meant the difference between failure and this big, million dollar business. If I give him another chance, he may do as well as I have done.'"

Business began to interest itself in club work; civic organizations wanted to help; farm organizations were working hard to make the most of the movement. There

was a need for some unit outside of the government to co-ordinate the activities of the many business and civic interests.

The result of this need was the National Committee on Boys' and Girls' Club work, of which such men as Walter W. Head, president of the American Bankers' association; Alexander Legge, president of the International Harvester company; Thomas E. Wilson, president of Wilson and Company; L. J. Taber, master of the National Grange; J. W. Coverdale, secretary of the American Farm Bureau Federation; Gov. Frank O. Lowden; and Sen. Arthur Capper, farm paper publisher, were members. Mr. Meredith served as chairman of the committee for three and one-half years and as a member of the executive committee until his death.

SOUGHT LOYALTY IN EMPLOYEES

As Mr. Meredith's own company grew, and he was less able to maintain a personal contact with all of his employees, he instituted for the guidance of his personnel department, organization policies that placed emphasis on the desirability of building and maintaining an intensely loyal group of employees. He believed firmly in the desirability of reducing labor turnover to a minimum, in spite of the fact that seasonal variation in the publishing business makes a fairly high percentage of turnover necessary.

He developed the Five-Year Club, a group of employees who have been in the continuous employment of the Meredith Publishing company for five years. The members of that group carry engraved gold watches presented to them at the Christmas party following the completion of their five years of service.

This Christmas party, now traditional, deserves more than a passing mention. Each year, every employee in the Meredith organization is a guest at the Christmas party—there is turkey, a Christmas tree, presents, and a Santa Claus. Each summer, Mr. Meredith was host at a picnic to which all the employees and their families were invited.

These activities were more than a gesture on Mr. Meredith's part. He was vitally interested in them, made it a point to attend them, and enjoyed them tremendously. The fact that nearly half of the 550 employees of the company are members of the Five-Year Club is indicative of the correctness of Mr. Meredith's conception of an employer's duty to his employees. Too, there are Ten-Year, Fifteen-Year, Twenty-Year and Twenty-five-Year clubs, and at a time just twenty-eight years after the founding of *Successful Farming*.

He created innovations in farm paper publishing practice that since have been generally accepted. In a period when "truth in advertising" seemingly was not a greatly sought-after virtue, Mr. Meredith announced, "We believe that every advertisement in this paper is backed by a responsible person. But to make doubly sure we will make good any loss to paid subscribers sustained by trusting any deliberate swindler advertising in our columns and any such swindler will be publicly exposed." That appeared at the top of the editorial column of Volume I, Number I, of *Successful Farming*.

Not long afterwards, the wording of the guarantee was made even more positive: "If you purchase any article advertised in *Successful Farming*, whether you buy it of the local dealer or directly from the advertiser, and it is not as represented in the advertisement, we guarantee that your money will be returned to you."

Back in the days when patent medicine advertising was the backbone of most publication advertising revenues, Mr. Meredith was in the van of those who were fighting the bad advertising practices of the cure-all nostrum makers. He refused to carry their advertising in the columns of his paper.

ADVOCATED PLANNED PLANTINGS

The problem of adequately protecting the farmer in a changing economic situation challenged him, and again he played a leading role. It was his belief that attempts

to increase the value of farm products should start with production control rather than with an attempt to dispose of a surplus after it has been produced. And he developed a plan which has all the earmarks of being fundamentally sound.

He was ever in the forefront of the movement for better farming methods and better farm homes. He recognized and believed thoroughly in America's need for an emphasis on the family life in the individual home.

Nor did Mr. Meredith's influence end with the agricultural field and its closely allied industries.

In the banking world his opinions became valued highly. He was a member of the board of directors of the Iowa National bank, Des Moines' largest financial institution, and was a member, for a time, of the board of the Iowa Trust and Savings bank. When the federal reserve banks were established, Mr. Meredith was named a director of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, the control bank of that federal reserve district. His judgment was sought and his opinions widely published in banking and insurance papers.

His influence in educational circles was very definite. He was a trustee of Drake university, of Simpson college, and of Des Moines university, the institution that a score of years after Mr. Meredith's matriculation absorbed Highland Park college.

He was interested in good roads because he was convinced they were very necessary to a universal high standard of living. And as usual, his interest took definite form. He founded the Jefferson highway, the well-marked highway that connects the Gulf of Mexico with Canada; he was president of the Jefferson Highway association, and was vice-president of the Iowa Good Roads association.

In the field of American business he was recognized as an outstanding figure. At the annual meeting of 1915, the Chamber of Commerce of the United States

ected him to its directorate representing the Seventh district, including the states of Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska; and he was re-elected in 1917. In 1923, the board of directors chose Mr. Meredith to fill the unexpired term of the Seventh district representative who had resigned. Again in 1925, he was re-elected to the board.

As a director of the Chamber of Commerce of the United States, he headed the important agricultural service committee of that organization, and was chairman of the agricultural committee of the Des Moines Chamber of Commerce.

As a farm paper publisher, he was honored by the Agricultural Publishers association, being elected to the vice-presidency, and later to the presidency. In his own profession, advertising, his abilities were signally recognized for he was chosen president of the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World, the organization now known as the International Advertising association.

Mr. Meredith was an enthusiastic Mason, one of the few honored with the active thirty-third degree, and served as the Sovereign Grand Inspector General in Iowa, of Scottish Rite Masons.

Labor always received a sympathetic understanding from Mr. Meredith. In the more than thirty-two years that he operated his own publishing plant, and during a period when labor disturbances were frequent, there was never a bit of difficulty between labor and the Meredith Publishing company. His viewpoint of the relation between labor and capital was wider than the purely local situation in his own company.

In recognition of that fact, he was made a member of the labor commission that President Wilson sent to the continent and the British Isles in 1918. He spoke frequently overseas before groups of workers and on his return to this country, was widely quoted as to labor and industrial conditions in war-torn Europe. In the

two Iowa state political campaigns in which Mr. Meredith was a Democrat candidate organized labor accorded him its hearty support. In 1914 he was a candidate in the primary for United States senator, but was defeated by Maurice Connolly, and in 1916 he was his party's candidate for governor, but was defeated by Wm. L. Harding.

Although Mr. Meredith first voted as a Republican, he decided that the Democratic principles more closely paralleled his own ideas and he transferred his allegiance to the Democrat party. He changed his political faith, well knowing that Iowa had always been, and probably would remain for some time, a solid Republican state.

When David F. Houston, serving as secretary of agriculture in President Wilson's cabinet, succeeded Carter Glass as secretary of the treasury, Mr. Meredith was chosen by the war-time president as secretary of agriculture, in which position he served with distinction to the end of the Wilson term.

When a member of the Board of Excess Profits Advisors he held the friendship of American business men. Another war-time activity was the result of his appointment to the navy commission on training camp activities. For close to two years, he served his country as a "dollar a year man."

Finally, as a climax to his political activities, came the day when Mr. Meredith was chosen as the figure around which the McAdoo dry Democrats could rally in the now famous Democratic convention of 1924.

Early in 1928, when the presidential campaign of that year was getting under way, Mr. Meredith was prominently mentioned as the compromise candidate—a logical thing, for after days of deadlock at the 1924 convention, although he had not announced a candidacy, Mr. Meredith's name was offered and polled close to 200 votes before the swing toward Mr. Davis, the nominee, became pronounced.

Mr. Meredith was an ardent supporter of prohibition. That, together with the questions of farm relief, tariff reform, adequate military preparedness, definite foreign policies, and tax readjustment were the political issues of 1928 as Mr. Meredith saw them. The formation of definite state department policies to guide America's relations with foreign countries was a subject of great interest to Mr. Meredith, because of his energetic support of sound movements to promote world peace. His sympathies were as broad as the world.

But before the preconvention campaign could much more than get under way, Mr. Meredith's health failed. On June 17, 1928, the beloved founder of the Meredith Publishing company died. He was only 51 years old.

Many changes have taken place since that day in June when Mr. Meredith left this life to which he had given so much. Progress and success were certain, for he had built a substantial foundation and had passed on his tremendous enthusiasm and vision to his associates and family.

Yes, the Meredith story did happen—it is a story that is full of romance, a story that could only be told in our own great country. An editorial that appeared in the *Des Moines Register* at the time of Mr. Meredith's death contained this significant tribute:

Such a man is the reassurance of Americanism. So long as the Hoovers can come from the blacksmith shops of little West Branch, and the Smiths from the back streets of New York city, and the Merediths from the printing presses of a depleted little organ of popular unrest, and in their fifties be the leaders, no mistake of public policy will be enough to disturb the calm confidence of the masses of the people.

And, we might add, like the stories of Hearst, Curtis and many others, the story of Meredith is the story of America—the kind that will be told many times in generations to come.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.